

NOTES FROM THE:

Comptroller Training Flight

by Maj JR Weilacher



One day a man was taking a walk in the country when he came across another man feverishly running with a bucket between a well and a large oak rain barrel that had a jagged hole at the bottom. Puzzled, the first man asked the second why he was so intent on what appeared to be such a self-defeating exercise. Sir, replied the sweat covered peasant, I will have you know that I am under orders of the King to keep this rain barrel three-quarters full. Stricken by the absurdity of the situation, it was all the first man could do to ask the peasant if he had ever considered repairing the hole in the barrel.

In his recent article, Future is Bright for First Command, Gen Hornburg, AETC/CC states, While recruiting is vital to maintaining the size of the force, retention is more important. I'd rather retain an airman with 10 years of experience than lose that person and have to recruit a new one. Simply stated, getting a handle on retention can be compared to fixing that hole in the barrel.

Given the staggering number of lieutenants programmed to attend our Basic Financial Management Course between FY01 and FY02, we began to review the Air Force's cumulative continuation rate (CCR) data for mission support officers. The CCR forecasts the percentage of officers entering their fourth or sixth year of service who will complete 11 years of service given existing retention rates. As of 23 January 2001, the CCR for mission support officers stands at 43%. Is this good, bad, or ugly? While we have yet to discover a stated Air Force goal for lieutenant retention (like the Air Force's goal to retain 55% of first-term airmen), it's probably safe to say we have some room for improvement in this area. Assuming that current trends hold and that the CCR for mission support officers in general is a valid indicator for the comptroller career field, only 129 of the roughly 300 lieutenants we currently have on board will be with us when it's time for them to pin on major.

So what makes the difference between those officers who intend to stay in the Air Force and those who plan to leave? According to the Report on Career Decisions in the Air Force, prepared by the Air Force Personnel Center, the top eight career factors why career oriented officers (excluding pilots) stay are:

patriotism, the retirement program, overall job satisfaction, job security, choice of job assignment, the availability of medical care, say in base of assignment, and the opportunity for education and training.

How does this compare with private industry? The results of a 1998 survey conducted by the US Labor Board across 1,000 companies lists the following reasons why employees in private industry stay: feeling valued, recognition, challenging job, career opportunities, relationship with manager, friendships with colleagues, money, and benefits.

Even without the benefit of an in-depth analysis of the differences in motivation between the Air Force and private industry, it is quickly apparent that It ain't all about money. So what can be done? In his book, Getting Employees to Fall in Love With Your Company, Dr Jim Harris discusses five principles used by top-notch companies in their efforts to reduce turnover and increase retention.

The first principle is to Capture the Heart. Harris contends that excellence is impossible with a disengaged heart. Interestingly, one could easily relate this notion of heart to the fact that patriotism ranks first among career-oriented officers' reasons for staying with the Air Force. While it's impossible to buy the shiver in someone's spine at the playing of the Star Spangled Banner, we can and should do everything to immerse our younger troops into the traditions and culture of our unique profession. This could range from merely encouraging their participation in the Unit Advisory Council to supporting them when they ask to organize the wing's next military ball.

The second principle is to Open Communication. The idea here is that informed employees feel more connected to the company. On a related note, it means letting your folks know that their input matters. Here is where tools like management by walking around and the commander's call come in handy. Not only do these activities make people feel valued, but they have the added benefit of giving leaders exposure to ideas and information that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. For example, one large

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firm was able to eliminate literally millions of pages of accounting reports by traveling to its offices, holding up reports, and asking managers whether or not the report was needed.

The third principle is to Create Partnerships. A partner is simply one who shares or is associated with another in some action or endeavor. Obviously, we who wear the blue suit are all connected in that we have pledged our lives to ensure the defense of our country and our way of life. Beyond this common bond, mentoring can be considered a higher form of partnering. According to AFI 36-3401, Air Force Mentoring, mentoring is an essential ingredient in developing well-rounded, professional, and competent leaders. While only recently codified, I can tell you from personal experience that the majority of our comptroller senior leaders have always been more than willing to share their perspectives with junior officers.

The fourth principle is to Drive Learning. In his book, Harris argues that the only long-term competitive advantage for any organization is the collective brainpower of its people. Quite often, an individual's ability to succeed can be traced to a broad experience base, learning, and increased opportunities for development. The Financial Management Professional Development program and its associated guidelines is just one of many programs that provides a guide for driving learning in the Comptroller career field. From a Schoolhouse perspective, we're happy to contribute in this area by providing numerous courses including our full supplemental course line up, 7-level Craftsman, and Financial Management Staff Officer Courses.

The fifth principle is to Emancipate Action. Finally, Harris believes that employees need to be given the freedom to succeed. In their article, Scientists in Organizations: Productive climates for research and development Donald C. Pelz and F.M. Andrews showed a clear increase in productivity in workers who were allowed to set goals/priorities and influence policymaking. From my experience working on the Commander's Resource Integration System (CRIS) (formerly known as OPTEMPO), I can tell you that many of the exciting systems initiatives in our business including CRIS and Leave Web are products of this principle in action.

In conclusion, we have a choice. We can be like the man in the story feverishly pouring water into the barrel, or we can work to repair the hole. Repairing the hole can be accomplished by being aware of why people choose to stay in the Air Force and taking steps to ensure we maintain the environment where they will want to.